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EDITORIAL

Defending, restoring, transforming

Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Emily Robinson

As we absorb the shocks of the pandemic and prepare for the battles ahead, Labour needs to be creative, clear-sighted, and unafraid of complexity. We must defend liberal democracy against the rising tide of the far right, while also making the case for a transformative political economy that radically redistributes power and wealth. We must be a party of values, while still honouring our founding tradition as a party of labour. And we must focus on the local, while remaining true to our internationalist principles.

Fascism is like a virus. As Hannah Malone writes in this issue, like a virus, it ‘comes in waves’; between ‘outbreaks’, it doesn’t disappear, but survives ‘in the nooks and crannies of society’. It relies on a ‘host organism’, such as the democratic state, and benefits from ‘crises of the liberal state and weaknesses of its “immune system”’. It comes in different strands, often with distinct national inflections, and finally, like a virus, it ‘mutates constantly’. This mutability makes precise definitions of fascism tricky; for some far-right movements today, categories like ultra-nationalism, illiberalism, authoritarianism, populism, or alt-Right are more appropriate. Nevertheless, a constellation of malign tendencies – to pit ‘the

people' against external and internal 'enemies', often racialised; to oppose liberal democracy; to celebrate a strong-arm leader; to ennoble violence – unite these movements. Opposing them is one of the left's most important tasks today.

Because fascists undermine and criticise liberal democracy, our opposition must involve defending its traditions. This is one reason we focus on liberalism in this issue of *Renewal*. Liberalism is, for some parts of the left, suspect. This is particularly the case for those associated with Blue Labour, who see liberalism as denoting atomised individualism; universalising, and deaf to the music of local tradition that knits particular communities together. Katrina Forrester (interviewed in this issue), in her book *In the Shadow of Justice*, draws out what is likely to be a surprising finding for those critics: John Rawls, father of liberal egalitarianism, was profoundly interested in communitarian thinking and placed it at the heart of his philosophical system. Rawls was a liberal in that he thought the 'basic structure' of society should enable individuals to pursue their own plans for a fulfilling life. But he was, on a deeper level, a communitarian who thought individuals necessarily developed their sense of what those plans might be in the context of their families, their associations (of faith, of work, and so on) and their communities. Labour must strike a balance between valuing our existing associations and communities, and empowering individuals to work to change them – or to leave them if they want to. And, fundamentally, Labour needs to assert that it is a society where power and wealth are shared more equally which protects communities while also empowering individuals.

In recent years, a debate has taken place between those – like Jan Werner-Müller and Timothy Snyder – who think we should recover cold war liberalism as a defence against fascism and totalitarianism, and scholars like Samuel Moyn and Helena Rosenblatt, who find cold war liberalism too narrow and individualistic, constricted and unambitious. Moyn and Rosenblatt argue that we need, instead, to recover the longer and more varied history of liberalism. Writing in this issue, Iain Stewart follows this line of argument in suggesting that we need to move beyond cold war liberalism and revisit more capacious and emancipatory versions of liberalism. Too often liberalism has become associated with defending society as it is, not as it could be. But is liberalism – even a strong liberal egalitarianism which guarantees economic rights as well as civil ones – enough? Forrester is sceptical. There is much to rescue from liberal egalitarianism, she argues, but, fundamentally, her work historicises and thus renders unfamiliar Rawlsian liberal egalitarianism. By revealing how profoundly Rawlsianism was shaped by the US and the UK of the 1950s, she shows how much we need to rethink for today. No longer can we assume that there is a core of consensus at the heart of society that can contain or override conflict; no longer should we take the straight, white man as the imagined subject of liberal democracy.

Stewart also points out, though, that not every cold war liberal was the defensive proto-neoliberal that critics sometimes imply: there are lessons to draw, even here.

As Stewart writes, the focus of cold war liberals ‘on democracy’s social and economic conditions of possibility’ was important. The economic model which they thought guaranteed those conditions would today be ‘ecologically indefensible and regressive from the standpoint of gender equality’; but the effort to think sociologically about liberal and social democracy is vital. Liberal democracy falters when its ‘immune system’ is compromised by social shocks: in the interwar period, for example, hyper-inflation in Germany, the Great Depression, mass unemployment, gross inequality, social misery. The left can win a broad base of support for some of the things we need to do on the basis of this argument: we need a society where wealth and power are shared more equally in order to inoculate against the far right.

Covid-19 is undoubtedly one of those shocks. It has revealed the fragility and inadequacy of our social safety nets to many who had previously thought themselves protected: some previously secure careers have dissolved, comfortable care arrangements have been disrupted. Yet, the experience of the pandemic has been primarily structured by class, and its intersections with race and gender: by our ability to work from home, to avoid public transport, to access technology and good food, to draw on savings, to share the responsibility of caring, and by the spaces and conditions in which we live. All of these have impacted not only the ease with which we have navigated the past few months, but also our chances of surviving them.¹ As Lyn Brown argued in our last issue, one of Labour’s central projects and pitches must be to transform our society and ‘ensure that our common life is never made so fragile again.’² Three articles in the current issue examine NHS fragility. Richard Bourne and Steve Iliffe, the Foundational Economy Collective and Portia Roelofs all examine what the Covid-19 crisis has revealed about the NHS and how it might be built back better after the crisis; the watchwords for all are transparency, localism, experimentation, learning from others.

But even the brutal experience of Covid-19 will not be sufficient to bring about deep change on moral – or even practical – grounds alone. There are massive, vested interests which will work against some of what we need to do to transform our economy. Appealing to liberal egalitarian ideals and a shared opposition to the far right won’t be enough. There are battles ahead, and this is the time to think about tactics and resources. Re-empowering trade unions is, for instance, one vital goal for the left; the proposal by Roelofs for highlighting the personal connections behind public sector contracts is another. Redistributing power and wealth will cause conflict.

Five years ago, Labour did not yet have a clear vision for how to bring about the necessary economic transformation. There were some important steps forward under Ed Miliband – most of all, the shift to focus on *predistribution* more than *redistribution* – but the practical apparatus was barely fleshed out. Labour seemed to be trapped in a bind; either proposing further New Labour-type policies, or going ‘back to the 70s’ with nationalisation. This is no longer the case. There is now a core set of ideas – community wealth building, the Green New Deal, co-operatives, public

and collective ownership, the Foundational Economy and so on – and the debate on the left is no longer over whether this agenda represents the future, but in what precise form and combination. It has been developing over many years, in think-tanks like CLES, IPPR and The Democracy Collaborative, in groups like the Foundational Economy Collective, and in the co-operative movement and local government. There are, to be sure, still vigorous debates to be had about the precise policies and priorities to be pursued, and policies and priorities will also need to be adjusted in the light of Covid-19. In recent posts on the *Renewal* blog, Stewart Lansley and Rajiv Prabhakar each pointed to different ways in which we might forge a post-crisis economic settlement based on cross-generational solidarity.³ But this important, ongoing debate over specifics should not distract us from the point that this is the only new economic project in town.

And towns are important – as *Renewal* board member Lisa Nandy reminds us.⁴ The economic agenda has the power to tackle gross inequalities between individuals and households, but it also, crucially, addresses inequalities between *places*. As Jonathan Reynolds says in his review of Joe Guinan and Martin O'Neill's book, *Community Wealth Building*, in this issue:

Place matters, as does control. Growing up in Sunderland in the 1980s felt miles away from Westminster. Unemployment was very high and there was the sense that the Government didn't care enough and that the people making the decisions about our local economy had never experienced what was really going on.

Our desperate need for more effective regional and local economic strategies is suggested by the fact that even the Tories have now started to talk about 'levelling up', though their proposed confection of high-tech panaceas and major infrastructure projects – which ignore the everyday needs of ordinary people's lives, for example the local buses on which so many more people rely – is unlikely to make a real difference.⁵

Many places which were 'boom towns' in the 1960s and 1970s, with cinemas, masses of pubs and clubs, local shops and community organisations, now have high streets lined mainly with betting shops, charity shops and takeaways. Decent work is much harder to come by, with the middle of the jobs distribution hollowed out. There are subtler shifts, too – going shopping, for example, used to mean going to a series of local shops where you would come to be known and tied into the community. That's no longer the case, and though most of us welcome the choice and convenience of supermarkets, many also mourn what's gone. It can't be recreated by going back: for one thing, that way of life relied on women mainly remaining housewives or taking only part-time work. But what's valuable – a vibrant local economy, with 'rooted' local firms that do more than just sell goods, supported by local people earning decent wages and with time, too, to spend in their local

economy and community – *can* be appreciated and promoted now. We have seen many ‘rooted’ local businesses flourish over the past few months, as people reoriented their worlds to their neighbourhoods, and small businesses assumed the role of community hubs. But, again, there have been huge local, regional, and class disparities in our capacity to do this. Community wealth building, the co-operative movement, strategies for the foundational economy and ‘rooted firms’, as well as taking monopolies into public ownership and democratising the economy – together these provide a set of ways to create stronger, better local economies throughout the UK, in ways that do not depend on the affluence of the local customer base and which are sustainable over the long term.

This is not just important for the businesses themselves, or for the local economies they support, but for their customers. The re-designation of supermarket workers as key workers only underlined what the labour and co-operative movement has known all along: that production and consumption go hand in hand, and that *both* should be bound to the needs of the people through democratic control. We need to set aside our squeamishness over consumer rights, which has stemmed not only from a (gendered) desire to prioritise people’s rights as workers, but also from a feeling that this is a middle-class agenda, associated with the liberal politics of contract. Workers, after all, are consumers too, and their access to stable supplies of affordable goods, which have not been produced in conditions amounting to slavery, is a matter of public welfare. As Guy Ortolano (interviewed later in this issue) has pointed out, there is a rich ‘history brimming with social democratic ideas, initiatives, and real achievements’ to draw on here. Part of the tragedy of 1979 and what followed was that ideas such as the ‘property-owning social democracy’ were squeezed out by the idea that markets are entirely at odds with state provision. In reality, ‘creative and adaptable’ social democrats had long blended the two, and we should recover these traditions today.

While Labour’s economic project is emerging, it means little without a strategy to take power at a national level so that we can implement these policies: as Reynolds points out, local action ‘must be seen as complementary to action at the national level’. In this issue, we return to the old debate over who Labour’s base is – or should be – and how Labour should present itself today. Sebastian Jobelius and Konstantin Vössing trace the development of social democratic parties from being class-based parties (from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century), to adopting a ‘social compromise’ approach after 1945. They suggest that the time for both of these approaches is now past, and that social democratic parties must reorient themselves as parties of values. This would require a shift in mindset:

Becoming a party of values means not only to hold values, but to make values the decisive rationale for all aspects of party behaviour. Value-based social democratic parties would stop fashioning themselves as representatives of merely nominal social groups that exist only in the minds of party strategists.

They would derive and justify their policies in reference to universal social democratic values.

There is much to be said for these arguments. Class is no longer a strong determinant of voting, while values are; a focus on values has the potential to move us past the tiresome stalemate between those advocating a focus on more educated, diverse, urban young people, and those preferring to foreground older, working-class people outside cities, usually imagined as white. A focus on values is, in some ways, the model of Claire Ainsley's 2018 book, *The New Working Class*, and we can expect it to be influential within Starmer's Labour Party now that Ainsley is Head of Policy. Her book suggested that the 'new working class' – a fragmentary category, of which the 'traditional' working class, employed in industry, forms less than a third – is united by four values: family, fairness, hard work and decency, which should form the basis for policy-making. But talking about values doesn't provide an easy fix to all Labour's problems.

Jobelius and Vössing have in mind a constellation of 'universal social democratic values' – freedom, justice and solidarity – which, they argue 'are widespread across different social groups', having been produced through 'socialization, personality, individual life choices, and material capital'. While their vision is transnational, Jon Lawrence, also in this issue, traces how social democratic values actually became embedded in British everyday life in the post-war years. The set of values he identifies – social entitlements linked to contributions, collective aspiration, and demotic individualism – has clear resonances with Ainsley's four values, and could also be imagined as manifestations of Jobelius and Vössing's justice, solidarity and freedom (in that order), but this is a somewhat rough-and-ready mapping, which underscores the importance of context and history. Rethinking Labour not as a party of social compromise but as a party of values will require us to immediately answer two questions: who gets to define our values? And who decides *how* they're interpreted in real-life situations?

Jonny Ball, writing in this issue, offers a counterpoint to Jobelius and Vössing. Corbyn's core support came from groups formed in opposition to the most damaging tendencies of precarity capitalism; but, Ball suggests, these groups should form only one part of Labour's coalition, along with the 'traditional' working class – he suggests we might call this 'Corbynism with Blue Labour Characteristics'. There is something important in *both* these positions, though they seem opposed: Labour should embody our values while retaining a clear sense of our historical commitments, our identity as a party of the working classes, even as we evolve. As Lea Ypi and Jonathan White set out in their writing on political partisanship:

Partisanship is a long-term, cumulative activity. A party typically defines itself by goals that cannot be realised in the short term but that require constancy of political commitment across time – in Labour's case including notions of

equality, justice, and collective responsibility ... The party is the organised expression of a tradition: it is an association built up over time and projected into the future, centred on normative commitments intended to endure.⁶

The Labour Party is the organised expression of a tradition of working people collaborating with each other to improve their lives and redistribute power, wealth and opportunity. Our history makes us who we are, and we can't forget it, even when we want to critique it. Our roots as the party of organised labour are important, even if that tradition at its origins was too narrow (in particular, too male and too white) to comprise the whole of our identity now. But it is the capacity to grow outwards from those roots that gives us vitality. As Ortolano puts it, social democracy is 'a living tradition, grounded in history but not therefore bound by it, capable of developing in novel ways.' Can we be both a party of values – a party that transcends class – and a party which remembers our historic identity and our historic commitment to labour? Blue Labour has long talked fondly of the 'politics of paradox'. But is it really so paradoxical? We are all many things at once, after all.

As Labour Together's 2019 General Election commission (discussed by Hannah O'Rourke in this issue) suggested, it will be in Labour's economic agenda that we find a way to bring together young and old, town and city. This is the agenda that offers changes needed by *both* young, precarious urbanites, *and* the older residents of hollowed-out towns. Too often the idea that Labour 'needs to have something to say to older, white, working-class voters in towns' is taken to mean that we need to talk about being tough on immigration. But – and leaving aside for now whether or not this diagnosis is correct – the important thing for Labour is to have something positive to say about how our towns and villages can thrive again, and become places which younger generations don't feel they have to 'aspire' to leave. The politics of place conceived *in economic terms* also offers a way for Labour to move beyond the false and restrictive opposition between nostalgic communitarianism and liberal individualism described by Forrester. It doesn't essentialise locality as a matter of inherent identity, but does acknowledge its power in structuring our daily lives, relationships and opportunities. It insists that it should be possible to live a *good life* wherever you happen to be.

Labour's economic agenda is shaping up to be resolutely national, regional and local. But this does not – and must not – mean an abandonment of our historic internationalism. As Mehmet Erman Erol suggests in this issue, reviewing Jeremy Green's *Is Globalization Over?*, we are living in the crisis phase of neoliberal globalisation. But this does not imply that an anti-globalisation or even nationalist-protectionist left is what we now require. Rather, Labour must push for a 'new global compact' and a reworking of international institutions to bring about a 'progressive reglobalisation'. In light of the pressing danger of global fascisms, this is vital.

Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite is associate professor of twentieth-century British history at UCL and co-editor of *Renewal*.

Emily Robinson is a senior lecturer in politics at the University of Sussex and co-editor of *Renewal*.

Notes

- 1 Craig Berry, 'Workers of the world, self-isolate!', *Renewal* blog, 7 April 2020: <http://renewal.org.uk/blog/workers-of-the-world-self-isolate>.
- 2 Lyn Brown, 'The fragile society', *Renewal*, Vol 28 No 2, 2020: <http://www.renewal.org.uk/articles/the-fragile-society>.
- 3 Rajiv Prabhakar, 'COVID 19 and the Child Trust Fund', *Renewal* blog, 22 June 2020: <http://www.renewal.org.uk/blog/covid-19-and-the-child-trust-fund>; Stewart Lansley, 'Knighthoods for the rich; sanctions for the poor: time for a new settlement', *Renewal* blog, 19 June 2020: <http://www.renewal.org.uk/blog/knighthoods-for-the-rich-sanctions-for-the-poor-time-for-a-new-settlement>.
- 4 Lisa Nandy, 'Ideas worth fighting for', *Renewal*, Vol 26 No 4, 2018: <http://www.renewal.org.uk/articles/ideas-worth-fighting-for>.
- 5 Bridget Phillipson and Scott Gilfillan, 'Route-masters: the re-regulation of bus services', *Renewal*, Vol 23 No 1/2, 2015: <http://www.renewal.org.uk/articles/route-masters-the-re-regulation-of-bus-services-in-tyne-and-wear>.
- 6 Lea Ypi and Jonathan White, 'The new partisanship', *Renewal*, Vol 24 No 2, 2016.